African Studies Keyword: Body

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Abstract: The human body is a central entity and analytic within African life and Africanist scholarship. The source of perception and the seat of animation, of life, it grounds experience of the world while also providing a rich set of symbols from which humans draw in political, social, and religious life to create and communicate meaning. Livingston reviews approaches to the body as a key concept in Africanist scholarship, tracing regimes of bodily representation ranging from the deployment of bodily symbolism in ancient smelting furnaces to the hypervisibility of the black female body in the European colonial imagination. She discusses a welter of bodily experience, from the pain of childbirth and the vulnerabilities of illness and accident to the sensorium or the kinesthetic power of movement and dance. In the process, Livingston considers developments within the field of African Studies via the body.

Résumé: Le corps humain est une entité centrale et analytique au sein de la vie africaine et de la recherche africaniste. Source de perception et siège du mouvement, de la vie, il fonde l'expérience du monde tout en fournissant un riche ensemble de symboles dont les êtres humains s'inspirent dans la vie politique, sociale et religieuse pour créer et communiquer un sens. Livingston passe en revue les approches du corps en tant que concept clé de la recherche africaniste, retraçant les processus de représentation corporelle allant du déploiement du symbolisme corporel dans d'anciens fours de fusion à la visibilité accrue du corps féminin noir dans l'imaginaire colonial européen. Elle aborde un large éventail d'expériences corporelles allant de la douleur durant l'accouchement à la vulnérabilité de la maladie, à l'accident sensoriel ou à la puissance kinesthésique du mouvement et de la danse. Ce faisant, Livingston examine les développements des études africaines par le biais du corps.

Resumo: O corpo humano é uma entidade central e analítica na vida africana e entre a academia dos Estudos Africanos. Fonte da perceção e centro de animação, de vida, o corpo humano é a base através da qual se experiencia o mundo, ao mesmo tempo que

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oferece um conjunto variado e rico de símbolos a que as pessoas recorrem na sua vida política, social e religiosa para criar e comunicar significados. Livingston percorre as várias abordagens do corpo enquanto conceito fundamental para a academia dos Estudos Africanos, identificando modos de representação do corpo que vão desde o uso do simbolismo corporal em antigos fornos de fundição até à hipervisibilidade do corpo da mulher negra na imaginação colonial dos europeus. A autora analisa um conjunto multiforme de experiências relacionadas com o corpo, desde as dores de parto e a propensão para as doenças e os acidentes até ao potencial sensorial e cinestésico do movimento e da dança. De caminho, Livingston avalia ainda os desenvolvimentos que se têm verificado no domínio dos Estudos Africanos através do corpo.

Keywords: body; Africa; sex; embodiment; representation; experience; care; corpse; historiography; consciousness

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Every African subject inhabits a body, and so does every scholar. But what is this foundational experience we share? The body is a transhistorical medium that is shaped and made meaningful in profoundly contextualized ways. This complex and potent entity is at once intimately familiar to us as embodied beings, and yet at the same time elusive and mysterious in its depth and possibility. In what follows, I trace a pathway through Africanist scholarly engagements with an entity both ubiquitous and opaque. I ask, how do the weight of historical change and continuity, the creativity of power, the workings of particular political, economic, and cultural arrangements, and/or the contours of identity particularize the shared domicile of the body and give it meaning? To query the body means grappling not only with its dynamic biological character, but also with its representational heft and detail, its political and economic value, as well as its experiential and social properties. I make no pretense of providing a comprehensive accounting of the literature. Instead, my aim is to suggest why and how Body is a keyword in African Studies—a vital domain of African thought, experience, and activity and a necessary analytic that cannot be taken for granted. I should note one important caveat at the outset. I am linguistically limited, and thus the path I will trace here is impoverished by its fidelity to the Anglophone literature.

The body is a material entity; it has a thingyness, a heft, a fragility—and that matters. The human body grounds our experience of the world. It is the source of perception, of sensory knowledge, and the platform of animation—of life. As the symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas (1970) observed, the human body also provides a rich set of symbols from which humans draw in political, social, and religious life to create and communicate meaning—the politics of the belly (Bayart 1993), the blood of Christ, the body politic, the heart of the matter. In Africa, as in so many other places, such symbolism

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could be concrete. In my own work (2005), I have noted how in early twentieth-century Bechuanaland, birthing and seclusion huts were shaped like wombs with a single aperture—a symbolic form that explicitly extended gestation and motherhood through an amplified body realized in architecture. Archaeologists have excavated a deep history of iron smelting across a wide swath of the continent that relied on the interplay of body-morphic form and ritual. Builders constructed iron smelting furnaces out of clay in the form of a woman, complete with blow pipes (shaped as phalluses) and bellows, as they harnessed the fertility of the clay womb to birth iron from rock (Herbert 1994; Schmidt 2009). The smelter was no mere machine. Men who forged the iron in the gynecomorphic ovens also undertook various rituals and prohibitions in order to smelt, abstaining from sex before operating the bellows and pipes. Bodily symbol, form, and ritual worked in concert to coax the production of high-carbon steel.

We see from the womb-smelter that the symbolic power of the body is metaphysical; it provides a world-making semiotic platform. Two anthropologists, both from South Africa, and writing nearly a decade apart, help us to see the profound implications of this fact. As Harriet Ngubane (1977) explained in her brilliant work of early medical anthropology, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine,* the entire world is manifest through the body. It is at once a singular organic entity, which will over time decay and decline, and also an element in a larger ecology (in the most expansive sense of the term). The body is both porous to and a condensation of the world, a cosmology in miniature. It exists in dynamic relation with the plants, animals, minerals, air, water, ancestors, and humans that sustain and constitute it. Political, social, and environmental forces that leave traces in the body and work with and upon the body in turn can effect political, social, and ecological results. But this anthropological insight raises a historical question. If the human body serves as a "condensed model of the collective order" (Comaroff 1985:124), then how do people respond to and experience profound changes in their world, via the body? In answering this question, fellow anthropologist Jean Comaroff showed how the body serves as a locus of consciousness, a mode through which processes as profound, power-laden, and contested as capitalism or Christianity were lived. Both Ngubane and Comaroff (see also Boddy 1982) pay special attention to the female body. Its life-bearing orifices and the gendered labor that bring it proximate to birth and death mark its power, but also potentially subject it to pollution and danger. Though they are both writing about Southern Africa, in contexts stretching across the continent, and indeed across the world, one can find collective efforts to manage the porosity of female bodies through ritual cleansing, modifying, and enclosing.

The metaphysical potency of the body, its potential to effect change in the world, is not abstract. The body's material substance, its parts, its fluids, that which lies within the envelope of skin, are intensely powerful (Fontein & Harries 2013). This fact is widely recognized; people throughout the world pay careful attention to corpses—not only Malagasy bone-turners. Many

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medical systems utilize human body parts and substances, from plasma fractionation and organ transfer in contemporary biomedicine to various elements in traditional Chinese pharmacopeia. Yet this very capacity of the body's contents raises moral concerns. Africans in many places searched the body for evidence of and means to extraordinary and nefarious powers such as sorcery. The body was the site of power struggle. Amid the predations of the slave trade and colonial rule, it is little wonder that African attention to the power of bodily fluids and parts spawned rumors of European cannibalism and vampiric extraction (Hunt 1999; White 2000; Thornton 2003). Writing about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gabon, historian Florence Bernault (2006) shows how Europeans sought to leverage this shared appreciation of bodily power. By attempting to re-enchant their own, white bodies through mortuary and other practices, even as they worked to de-sacralize African bodies through rules of hygiene and policies addressing procurement and use of bodily relics and charms, the French sought to control this bodily power to their own advantage.

This Gabonese example hinges on attempts to differentiate bodies by race, which requires a tremendous amount of activity, as did the earlier South African examples which hinged in part on doing the same by sex. Through the body and its spectrum of difference, we interpret or query a common humanity and create categories and hierarchies of race, sex, beauty, ability, and age. And, of course, our bodies are a key site of human vulnerability, as well as a source of value, strength, and creativity. (Notice how I easily slipped into the word "we.") For many years, scholars took the body as a given—a universal entity across time and space. Sure, there was some cultural elaboration built upon this biological entity, but that cultural elaboration was the object of study, not the body itself.

Scholars were aware of the body all along. Karl Marx, for example, observed how it labored and then was damaged and spit out by capitalist machinery. Louis Althusser would extend this Marxist interest in how capitalism reformed the body by pointing to the ways that ideology was experienced bodily, as alluded to earlier in reference to the work of Jean Comaroff. It was the sheer biological capacity of African bodies that was of interest to those who sought their labor, employing them as head-loading porters, stevedores, miners, and farmers. Capitalist interest in the laboring capacities of African bodies drove colonial resource extraction and the commodification of African people in the transatlantic slave trade. Or, in a different register, consider the pioneering work of the feminist historian of labor Luise White (1990), whose highly sensitive study of sex work in colonial Nairobi approached the body as site of economic self-making and contestation. Yet, the thrust of much of the scholarship on African labor, taking its cue from Marx, was more focused on the value of labor and processes of labor extraction, or on the political power of labor, than on the body as such (Akurang-Parry 2000; Bauer 1998; Cooper 1977, 1996; Ferguson 1999; Lindsay 1999; Parpart 1983; Zeleza 1997). Consider the famous debates between philosophers Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu over the nature of Akan personhood

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(Gyekye 1978; Wiredu 1983; Wiredu & Gyekye 1992). Here the body was a container for the soul (*okra*), and the assumed underlying basis for humanness, but not of interest in and of itself. The body was everywhere and nowhere.

Intensive humanistic and social science interest in the body emerged in the late 1970s and took shape in the 80s. Part of this can no doubt be attributed to the rise of second-wave feminism, with its framing of the nature-nurture problem—a body problem if there ever was one (Ortner 1974). And partly interest arose out of post-structuralism. While poststructuralist scholarship could destabilize and/or undermine many other seemingly universal referents—the individual, the economy, the "West"—each of us lives in our own body with its sweat and shit and thirst, its pressing needs and unmistakable materiality. And so the body emerged in this intellectual moment as a problem worthy of intense inquiry. To offer only two examples among many, first Michel Foucault (1975/1995) took up the body as a locus of power, a site where the state regulated its citizens, or where subjects took upon themselves the projects of the state. Later, Judith Butler (1990) helped inaugurate the field of queer studies by analyzing how male and female identities are built up through performance, rather than as natural manifestations of an assumed body with a stable sex binary. In other words, Butler established that gender was a process continually undertaken through bodily and discursive practice. The acts that make up these "performances" are not consciously chosen by people trying to portray a particular role or identity; rather, social life unfolds through a complex and unending choreography that continually runs through the body.

Africanists had already begun to unravel the body on their own terms. Ifi Amadiume (1987) had already destabilized biology as the basis of gender in her pathbreaking study of the effects of colonial and postcolonial history on gender and sex in Igbo society. This critique of bodily assumptions aimed at the heart of western academic feminism was work that Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) would theoretically extend to make a more totalizing claim. Oyěwùmí argued that seniority (as calculated relationally through kinship) determined social relations among Yoruba, not biological sex differences, in contrast to European norms. The body here was not deterministic, in the way it was for Western cultures. Oyěwùmí went much further than Amadiume to claim that, indeed, gender did not exist in Yoruba, and its analytic use is neocolonial. This bold argument drew skepticism along various lines (Matory 2003; Bakare-Yusuf 2003; Cole, Manuh, & Miescher 2007). Oyěwùmí turned to etymology and semiotics to make her case, thus leaving aside the experience of a sexed body and the performance of gender. Oyěwùmí was writing from positions of "suspicion towards externally derived concepts in favor of hermetically sealed cultural knowledge" (Bakare-Yusuf 2003:120), a mode that foreclosed the polysemy, historical dynamism, and plurality of African cultures. Yet the work of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí together opened vital avenues for considering the body beyond biological determinism, and cautioned against the importation of body-logics from one domain to another.

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In this context, with the normative body destabilized, scholars approached the African body as politically fraught. As the medium through which racial formation was drawn, and as the object of commodification and control, the African body became both a problem and an opportunity—an object of study that revealed the axes of universals and particulars. Close attention to the body by scholars of the Black Atlantic (Morgan 1997; Block 2018), early modern and modern science (Vaughan 1991; Schiebinger 1990; Delbourgo 2012; Dubow 1995; Gilman 1985), and African colonialism (Gordon 1992) revealed how interpretations of superficial, phenotypic difference had been massaged to underpin and uphold an entire world order. Capitalism, empire, science, and anthropology itself were all born from European interest in, anxieties about, and abuses of African bodies.

This body was a spectacle; it was overdetermined and overburdened. Think of the famous case of Sara Baartman, which painfully articulates the scopic regime to which the African female body was subjected. Her body was supposed to stand in for a type, and as such was made to efface her person, even as it came to serve as the basis for scientific careers, prurient pleasure, and British claims to liberal morality (Abrahams 1996; Strother 1999; Magubane 2001). Much of this scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s was intersectional—gender and race articulated in critical ways. Scholars recognized that the hypervisibility of the black female body in the European imagination mattered. Most of this scholarship was textual, even if it was visual. In other words, this work pursued how the African body had been reduced to and read as a text on which surface (which in turn was often distorted through the racist imagination) had been mistaken for depth. It was a history of European representations more than of Africans' experiences of their own bodies. Such work was and remains tremendously important; the spectacle of the African body, its hypervisibility and pathologization, is the condition of possibility of so much. But as with so many other things, it is easy for us to be mired in the refutation of European colonial ignorance and colonial violence, given their enduring effects. Over time it became enough to say, look here! This body was a fantasy, this body was a fetish, this body was misread.

Surely part of the emphasis on representation and on the visual stemmed from the difficulty of entering into the somatic space of another human being, be they past or contemporary subject. In reducing the body to text, as I just noted, people read or misread depth from surface. But what other way was there, is there, to get inside the body of another? What might we find there? What kind of depth was this? And what to do with the political problem that any difference found might pose? What happens to our basic beliefs about gender, race, and even humanity, if the "naturalness" of the shared body is questioned? And what is the obvious and taken-for-granted modality we call body if we are to let go of the private property and self-defense model that European modernity wrought? These are big questions, whose answers, in part, were found in Africa.

By the mid- to late 1990s, a new set of works emerged, in which the body became a site of struggle, of change, of contestation, of self-fashioning.

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Timothy Burke's (1996) brilliant and in many ways singular book on soap and the reshaping of bodily practices of hygiene in the first half of twentieth-century Zimbabwe introduced ways that the body became tied to markets through consumption and desire, while Lynn Thomas's (2003) work on the politics of the womb in Kenya, like Nancy Hunt's (1999) work on fertility in Congo, insisted on the density of cultural and social attachments through which the political body is inhabited. The body, they reminded us, was collective. Thomas showed us how intensely over-determined the African female reproductive body was, such that struggles for control operated on a scale of political interest and activity that stretched from Eleanor Rathbone to Jomo Kenyatta to Meru grandmothers. In Thomas's and Burke's hands, the body was no longer a text. Now it was plastic, historical, deeply social, and political in new ways. This body was smeared, cut, massaged, decorated; it matured and reproduced. In these actions, readers came to see what Africans themselves had long recognized: that bodies generate feelings in onlookers, and those feelings produce activity in the world. The body, even as a locus of self-making, is inherently intersubjective.

It was not only the actual body that was intersubjective, but also its figuration. Scholars of photography have pursued this intersubjectivity offered by the body even as they map how bodily iconography circulates. Ethnographic photography figured African bodies to serve twentieth-century European modernist iconography, even as African studio portraiture opened new aesthetic modalities that moved in the opposite direction. Photography, in other words, became, as anthropologist Hudita Mustapha (2002) terms it, "archiving the body." On the one hand, consider the aestheticized primitivist images of East Africans taken by Nazi photographer Leni Riefenstahl. As anthropologist George Meiu (2008) describes, Riefenstahl selected and posed only what she considered the most photogenic and perfect bodies, excluding the old, the flabby, the impaired. Assembled into coffee table books, such images offered Europeans a voyeuristic intimacy predicated on rendering bodies isolated from time. As Meiu argues, these images create a kind of "eroticized nostalgia," generating an "embodied reading" in the European viewer. But on the other hand, remember that Africans were themselves artists and not merely objects of representation. For West African studio photographers, the gap between bodily surface and the interior of the person became a site of play and experimentation (Buckley 2000). Such experimentation moved beyond the textual as portrait subjects embodied sensations of elegance and cosmopolitanism, or as photographs circulated to produce feelings of nostalgia, reverie, or what Manthia Diawara (2002) describes as a "strange familiarity, a simultaneous desire and repulsion" (Buckley 2006). Looking at the work of famed Malian photographer Malick Sidibe in a newly independent Mali, Diawara finds in Sidibe's photographs evidence of the political struggle over the habitus, the lived body. Diawara captures the ways in which Bamako youth forged a novel Pan-African embodiment and mode of bodily self-fashioning that ruptured the binary between the authentic and the modern.

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The move away from European representations to African self-fashioning and figuration of bodies did not remove the problem of the non-normative. Africans, and not only Europeans, had bodily norms to which they imbued meaning, even as impaired bodies were prevalent, given how historical conditions of poverty, violence, and racial capitalism worked upon the body. The arrival of disability as a subject of African studies inaugurated through the landmark collection by anthropologists Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte (1995) established bodily impairment as a critical subject of concern. Ingstad and Whyte argued that non-normative bodies posed problems of personhood as well as raising pragmatic and ethical questions around care and responsibility. A decade later, my own work in Botswana (2005) examined how persons were constituted bodily through their social relationships, and thus bodies considered non-normative by observers were indexical of some tension or problem within with the social field (see also Zoanni 2018). Literary theorist Ato Quayson (2007) took these insights to their most foundational iteration by examining the primacy by which disabled bodies produce "aesthetic nervousness" in literature. This is a problem of representation, in which the body of the disabled subject produces an affective response in the non-disabled Other that undermines norms of representation. In the process, Quayson reveals how the disabled body operates within postcolonialism as a bridge across literature, to bring Euro-American and African expression into the same frame of analysis.

Embodiment, the habitus, feeling—in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the body was taking on new life in African Studies, even as ways of inhabiting the body were recognized as historically contingent. The question on the table was how to get inside this body, how to move beyond the visual. Was even the sense of an inside and an outside already foreclosing something about how bodies were connected, porous to one another, mutually constituted, collective? And if one did get inside, how might this interiority (in all of its intersubjectivity) contribute to knowledge? Amid this promising exploration of bodily struggle and self-making by historians, anthropologists began to approach African bodies through creative methods that undermined the singularity or obviousness of the modern, Western body. They revealed this supposedly ur-body to be the product of historically situated folk wisdom, rather than a baseline of normativity against which any African body might deviate. Caroline Bledsoe (2002), using demography of all things, uncovered a logic of contingent time, one that connected the social and the biological as they accumulated and unfolded over a woman's life course. This was no mere cultural elaboration, no tribal tattoo on that same old normative body. Instead, she made a parallel move through early twentieth-century American history to show how the body that Gambian women inhabited helped to explain bodies elsewhere. In other words, through what began as a very local study, Bledsoe repositioned African embodiment as a domain productive of universal knowledge.

Then Kathryn Geurts (2003) delivered on the promise Marcel Mauss (1973) first offered in the 1930s with his explication of the habitus. Taking up

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the question of embodiment in Anlo-Ewe land in Ghana, Geurts opened the somatic dimensions of the body through the senses. Drawing attention to kinesthetic, balance, and haptic domains of the sensory, she dispensed with the taken-for granted five-sense sensorium. More importantly, she showed how embodiment was an explicit means of historical knowledge and political and intellectual insight. In the process, one could begin to glimpse the implications of why and how dance and massage are central modalities in African healing, and how bodily knowledge might offer modes of philosophical communication and activity equal to the work of written texts. This is an insight with so many implications for African studies, with its often overwrought discussions of orality and textuality. This is a promise that Rudolph Ware (2014) has most recently brought to fruition with his book *The Walking Quran*, in which the body has been central to the transmission of religious knowledge in West Africa over a millennium.

Ware's work reminds us that the body is precious. But this also means it can be the site of tragedy, a fact brought home by the massive and profound assault upon the body that unfolded in East, Central, and Southern Africa beginning in the 1980s: the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is really its own keyword. The body was the site of historical accumulation. Histories of poverty, racism, and inequity, the colonial regimes of migrant labor and the material hierarchies of gender they produced, ground themselves into the bodies in the present, expressing this history in disease (Fassin 2006). The epidemic returned us, in the most awful of ways, to the material vulnerability and vitality of the body. The plasticity of the body had clear biological and existential limits. The African body could be deconstructed, the clinic could be a site of bodily surveillance and governmentality, people could take on the self-making projects of science and liberalism through their bodies, and they could make and remake themselves through bodily practice; the body was a site of knowledge and perception and historical memory. Ultimately, however, the HIV-laden body would benefit from some pills or it would die. These were the same pills that HIV-laden bodies everywhere required, but the same pills that only some bodies were able to access (Nguyen 2010). Universals and particulars are made to matter, as HIV has reminded us through material relationships.

The HIV-laden body also brought back the African sexual body, long cast out from a shameful, earlier era of prurient scholarly fascination. Now sex was again a subject of intense interest. This HIV-inspired African sexual body was not a text, but something of a titillating stick-figure, an animal-machine driven by needs and desires. These desires were for bodies to touch one another, but much social science work in this vein was, paradoxically, disembodied. Numbers of partners were counted, sexual positions surveyed, uses of condoms enumerated, but in the process, much that we had learned about intersubjectivity, about bodily knowledge, about the senses, about extra-cognitive forms of mutuality and communication, were set aside. I do not mean to mischaracterize a field by trotting out and taking pot-shots at its low-hanging fruit. There were many exceptions amid this sudden flurry of HIV research (see, for

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example, Hunter 2010; Nguyen 2010). In the wake of this tidal wave of objectifying and instrumentalized studies, a new and decidedly anti-essentialist conversation began to emerge, evidenced by Sylvia Tamale's (2011) landmark volume, *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Indeed, the license the epidemic gave to sexuality scholarship may have borne its greatest fruit in opening African Studies to queer scholarship and queer analyses a decade or two later.

And yet, if sex could be black-boxed, the richest bodily work to come out of this return to insistent materiality brought by the HIV/AIDS epidemic was the literature on bodily care. Here I want to single out an essay by Mokhantso Makoae (2009) on the phenomenology of bodily care in Lesotho. Because it draws together many of the themes I have been trying to describe in my comments here, it instantiates their stakes in an existentially fraught context, since it is published in a journal with a readership that spans policy and applied research. Makoae (writing in the *African Journal of AIDS Research*), a social scientist, returned attention to the actual material body at the center of caregiving. She showed how caregiving in Lesotho in the context of high rates of HIV and lack of access to antiretroviral therapy was materially, emotionally, institutionally, politically, and existentially laden. In Makoae's hands—and my reference to hands is intentional—the body of the patient and the body of the caregiver are intersubjective, rendered in a dyad that is not meant to be equal; after all, one is very sick and the other not (yet). They are connected through touch, through disgust, through love, and fear; these two bodies (patient and caregiver) are biological, material, vulnerable, and universal in their biology, but politically and economically situated in relationship to global politics and global markets that render them as peripheral because they are without value as labor and cannot afford to consume. These bodies are discursive; what could be starker than the representational politics around bodies with AIDS (be it patient or saintly caregiver)? But they are also fleshy, material, lively entities, no mere container or form of property; they merge with and offer portals to the persons within.

Parallel to the questions raised by the AIDS epidemic are those forced on the table by war, genocide, slavery, rape, and other modes of political predation. The body, in other words, could be a crime scene.[1] Achille Mbembe (2003) described the violent modality of sovereignty that he terms "necropolitics" as "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies" expressed in the right to maim and kill. Elaborating on this form of sovereignty, he describes (2003:35) contexts where massacred corpses lie in undifferentiated heaps, "meaningless corporealities," which yet also possess a "stubborn will to mean, to signify something."

Here, the materiality of the corpse could take on a forensic meaning, even as the symbolic weight and metaphysical potency of the body were made manifest. Anthropologists had long studied funerals as symbolically loaded rituals and death as a process of liminality. But more recently, scholars have turned to the corpse itself as a site of social and political activity, revealing the metaphysical significance of the body as a threshold between registers of life (Salpeteur & Warnier 2013). Such scholarship represents a maturation

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beyond the earlier divides between representations and experiences, materiality and culture that I have traced above in approaches to the body. As historian Walima Kalusa (2017:138; see also Vaughan 2008) puts it, "The significance of the dead body to the living and to the survival of political regimes should not be underestimated. Concrete and protean, sacred and profane, the corpse is a complex, ambiguous and enigmatic object." Such themes were evidenced in high profile struggles over the repatriation of trophy corpses of imperial power. Those seeking the repatriation refused their reduction to the status of "artifacts" (Mkhize 2009; Parsons & Segobye 2002; Rassool 2015).

These works I have mentioned, and their many fellow travelers, should inspire us, pointing to new and unexplored domains of African studies. The human body itself in Africa is not static. It changes over the life course, and it changes as a category of experience over time. It changes at the level of biology, of form, of feeling, of vulnerability, of habitus, of practice—and as the body changes (or as continuities are upheld through purposive activity), so does so much else. The body is the locus of consciousness, of pain, of pleasure, of interiority, and of selfhood. When we ignore it or passively, unquestioningly reproduce the body-as-private-property model of European modernity, we have missed so much. We have missed the opportunity to truly imagine how history occurred at the level of feeling, how people experience political personhood, how and why biomedicine threatens the intersubjectivity of care. As we continue to wrestle with orality, textuality, and increasingly image, I think we would do equally well to attend to body as method.

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Note

1. I borrow this phrasing from Sameena Mulla (2014).

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